



Ethical Responsibilities to Animals and the Environment[©]

A survey and perspective



RAFAEL MATTOS DOS SANTOS¹

BASc, MASc, PEng

rafael.santos@alumni.utoronto.ca

All around the world and throughout time people and civilizations have been faced with circumstances where human interests conflict with the existence of animals and the balance of nature's wholes. Be it because of land, wealth, resources, food or religion, challenges arise and decisions of what is right or wrong to do must be made. To assist in these decisions and give people guidance, ethical theories and doctrines are built based on what is actually observed and on deeper, more profound philosophical thought. Since these theories have many dissimilarities, although many similarities are also present, discussions arise on what is the most valid approach to behave toward something, such as responsibilities to animals and the environment.

Many theories are directly related to living beings, such as bio-centrism, eco-centrism, deep ecology and Buddhist thought, while others like ethical relativism, utilitarianism, deontology and ethics of care can be applied to these issues, as well as many other problems that appear in our world. By surveying all these points of view it is possible to arrive at a conclusion: there is strong evidence that animals and the environment deserve moral standing and consideration. Yet how to perform this is certainly not clear and will probably never be answered with absolute conviction. But then again, such doubts and uncertainties are the driving force of philosophy, and this school will keep supplying humanity with more diverse and intriguing theories.

Ethical relativism is many times the easiest route for someone to explain why things are done differently and why one should not criticize actions of other people, even when it comes to issues like the environment and animal lives. This theory relies on the idea that there are no universal truths or cross-cultural norms, and that judging what is right or wrong is a function of culture. This theory is certainly a nightmare to all environmentalists who hope to set up conservation areas or endangered species acts. Since, according to this theory, people's actions and behaviours are determined by the person's upbringing and surrounding actions, it would be absolutely normal for a person to kill whatever animals they wanted or set forests on fire or dump toxic waste in rivers as long as that is what everyone around them were also doing.

This theory has quite a few flaws. First, these are moral agreements which are cross-cultural, such as murder, which is considered wrong in all societies. Second, belief in something or some action does not render it true; therefore what other people do does not necessarily mean it is right. Without questioning of actions there is no moral progress in a society. A last point that shows why ethical relativism is not valid, at least not in most cases, is that a person who believes in this ideal is not allowed to criticize others. Therefore, even if personal beliefs or freedoms are

¹ Rafael M. Santos is currently doctoral student in Chemical Engineering at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, in Belgium. Rafael is a member of the Knowledge Platform on Sustainable Materialization of Residues from Thermal Processes into Products - SMaRT-Pro² (<http://smartpro2.eu>).

being harmed, a person may not complain or demand changes. Thankfully, to animals and the environment, this theory is not applied to government policies or most education systems. Thus moral standing to nature is still possible, based on other theories that follow.

Environmental concerns, as well as concerns for lives of animals, even those species that are in danger of extinction, are many times tied with the idea of private land. Throughout history land has been thought of as an instrument to achieve a good life and freedom from labour, government or economies. According to liberalists, one should be able to do whatever one may want with his own land. Traditionally, land in its natural state was considered unowned, and property or exclusive rights were transferred when labour and land were mixed.

Absolute freedom of the land to its owner would endanger the environment to a great extent. If the liberalist idea was accepted, people would be allowed to pollute soil and water in their property, as well as take control of all living beings in the land. There are many opposing ideas that ensure that land is protected from harm of human's ideology of taming the "beast" that is nature. Regarding property rights in connection of labour, some say that labour is lost when done on land, or that at least only improvements made are owned but not the entire land itself. The idea of property also can be opposed by saying that everyone should have a right to use any land, so private property could not be possible because it would harm people's freedom of using land. The idea of private property especially affects native people, who historically never grew crops or did significant labour on lands, living off of hunting and gathering. According to the private property ideology, natives never owned the land, and that's why settlers were free to take the land and expel them in colonial or even present times. Animals and the environment should be protected from this kind of human-centered freedom, which excludes all but human interests and desires.

The aboriginal view of the land is very promising with respect to giving animals and the environment moral standing. For them, nature, including lands, forests, rivers and animals are an extension of body and self. They lived on the idea of stewardship, whereby land was shared by the entire community with all other forms of life and everyone was equally responsible to take care of it. Even though they killed and consumed animals, they did so respecting their existence as beings not too different from themselves and attempted to inflict as little harm or destruction as possible. Aboriginals are not at all inclined to the idea of property and economics because they think that putting a price on something that one cares about is to devalue it; it is much like putting a price on your own mother.

Economics plays a major role in today's world. Its most common form, capitalism, lives on the idea of an open market which decides who cares most about something by how much they are willing to pay for it. Other basic concepts of economics are cost-benefit analysis (evaluating if something is worth pursuing based on cost) and cost-effective analysis (reaching a goal by spending as little as possible to do so). Economics also uses the utilitarian principle to a great extent, which tells if something is right or wrong by how much it increases the overall good, or happiness. This relates to the environment many instances where conservation of wilderness areas is confronted with the desire of urban development (golf courses, ski resorts...).

The main problem with economics is that it cannot evaluate people's values, but only their desires. Therefore attending people's desires might not always lead to a greater good. Also, the amount that people are willing to pay for something is not always related to how much they care



for it. Everyone likes to have clean water, but leaving the water absolutely clean is very expensive. Usually people will rather just have acceptably clean water and invest remaining money on another community project rather than spend it all on water. A more friendly form of economics is what is called sustainable economics. Its basic principle is that if economical demands are all that controls actions, the strain on the environment will be too great and will lead to disastrous consequences.

The Earth has a limited production capacity, so from it only regulated amounts of resources should be allowed to be extracted. This ensures that environments are not destroyed or polluted to a large extent and also ties in with future human needs of non-renewable resources. What must be observed, however, is if what are being sustained are nature and the environment or just desires and ways of life. This model is very often human-centered, but may be extended to animals and non-living nature. Although, as philosophy has come to show, extending human ideals to nature is not absolutely effective.

Continuing with the idea of preserving nature for future generations, many say that responsibility to them is nonexistent. Ideas like ignorance (no knowledge of future needs), disappearing beneficiaries (different generations being born depending on paths taken) and temporality were established to disregard future interests. This is not favoured by ideas of conservation of the environment because it would be very difficult to write environmental protection policies and the environment would be extremely harmed by present economical and industrial actions. The concept of deontology, however, explains that minimal rights are intrinsic, and that everyone, even unborn future generations, should have access to them. Regard for future generations is very closely related to our ethical responsibilities towards animals and the environment. Even if moral standing to nature is not directly given, at least it will be preserved based on human interests.

Many philosophers have tried to build ethical theories directly related to animals. Early visions of moral standing towards animals used rationality as a basis to judge which animals had value and had to be respected. Rationality, however, was a difficult concept to apply to animals because in the human sense, only humans were rational, but if animals' actions were to be considered rational it would be difficult to draw a line of where rationality begins. Peter Singer² came up with a different concept that aimed at including more animals and clarifying which animals have or do not have value. His idea used the basis of pain and pleasure for moral standing to be given. According to him, animals had an interest not to suffer, so harming them was wrong. Pain was necessary and sufficient for animals to have moral standing.

Although Singer's idea was very appealing and revolutionary, it still failed to include all animals (insects and lower animals have no indication of feeling pain). Also, the argument that pain is both necessary and sufficient is too strong, since death without pain is possible. Ideally pain should be only sufficient, but not necessary for moral standing. Any plants were also excluded by his views since they appear not to suffer. Another problem with Singer's idea was that species

² Peter Albert David Singer (born 6 July 1946), Australian philosopher, is the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne. Singer is best known for his book *Animal Liberation*, widely regarded as the touchstone of the animal liberation movement.

were excluded, making it an individualistic ethic. Another distinct theory regarding consideration for animals was proposed by Tom Regan³. His system uses the subject of a life concept, which is a list of characteristics that show what creatures deserve moral consideration. Once again his views are too strong, since by the subject of a life concept only humans and some mammals are considered to have moral standing. Both Singer's and Regan's views were still very anthropocentric. They used humans as the standard to judge moral consideration and compared human characteristics with those of animals.

A new movement that arose to improve upon earlier ideas was bio-centrism. Its basic concept was that all living things had to be given moral consideration. Albert Schweitzer⁴ presented the concept of reverence for life to explain this idea. By looking at the wonders of nature, he attempted to promote an ethics of virtue and a shift to motivation rather than rules. To him, animals had intrinsic values that could not be denied. His ideas, however, did not go too far, being considered too naive and romantic, besides lacking any systematic that could be implemented in the real world.

Paul Taylor⁵ was aware of these flaws and created a more systematic approach to giving animals moral standing. His idea was that animals were teleological centers of life, having a good of their own. Animals were said to have interests of their own, and were valuable even in the absence of humans. His bio-centric outlook described that humans are not superior beings and that they are part of Earth's community and the interconnectiveness of nature. Another set of rules he created were to judge conflicts of interest. He said there are both basic and non basic interests, and when these collide between humans and nature, one of five actions can be taken: self defence, proportionality, minimum wrong, distributive justice and restitutive justice.

Even though Taylor's ideas seem very appealing, in many instances they do not work. This theory asks too much of humans, therefore many non basic interests, such as gardening for example, would conflict easily with basic interests of tiny creatures; as a result human development and many desires would not be possible to be accomplished. Another negative aspect of these bio-centric theories is that they are too individualistic, not considering nature's wholes and internal relationships. Also, non-living things, such as rivers and mountains, which are of great interest to environmentalists, are completely overlooked.

To improve upon the lack of consideration for non-living parts of the environment in bio-centrism, eco-centrism was established. Using the instrument of ecology, eco-centrism considers non-living things important because they interact with all living beings. The result is a more holistic ethic which looks at all wholes in nature rather than just individual parts.

³ Tom Regan (born November 28, 1938), American philosopher, is professor emeritus of philosophy at North Carolina State University. Regan is the author of numerous books on the philosophy of animal rights, including *The Case for Animal Rights*, one of a handful of studies that have significantly influenced the modern animal liberation movement.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer (14 January, 1875 – 4 September, 1965) was a German theologian, organist, philosopher, physician, and medical missionary. Schweitzer received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize for his philosophy of "Reverence for Life".

⁵ Paul W. Taylor, philosopher, is professor emeritus in philosophy at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. Taylor's theory of biocentric egalitarianism, related to but not identical with deep ecology, was first published in his 1986 book *Respect for Nature*, and is taught in many university courses on environmental ethics.



Tied in with the concept of eco-centrism is deep ecology. Unlike shallow ecology, which only looks at immediate environmental problems, deep ecology looks at the underlying causes of the problems. Ecology is a very important tool as a science that explains relationships between living and non-living parts of nature. Deep ecology uses ecological equality to describe that all living organisms are at a same level of existence and importance. Self realization is said to be

the understanding of a person's existence within the interconnectiveness of nature. A profound thought is that the personal self is under an illusion of being separate from the larger Self (nature as a whole).

Ideas of ethical responsibilities are in no way modern. Ancient religions like Buddhism and Jainism consider animals to be equal to humans in terms of bundles of energy and continuous life. The concept of ahimsa⁶, non violence to animals, supposed that hunting another being is like hunting oneself since life is a series of rebirths between different realms of existence (gods, human, hell beings and animals). According to a person's karma, rebirths will occur at a higher or lower level. Animals are very much like ourselves since one day we all were animals and might become again. To them the questions of giving moral consideration is not relevant because they do not see themselves different from other forms of life.

Even though one may believe in giving ethical consideration to animals and the environment, that is not what we see in today's society. Most people consume animal products and even though they are sympathetic to animal well-being, they will not consider changing behaviour. An attempt to explain why this happens is an ethic of family (Rafael M. Santos, 2001). By analysing which animals are commonly consumed and killed, it is possible to say that those animals that have weak family bonds are given less consideration. Animals like cattle, chickens and pigs do not have family relations from early adulthood on, as well as any lower animals like flies, spiders, cockroaches... Because of this they are killed with little regard, while animals like elephants, lions, bees and whales, which have a more developed family or social construct, are preserved and given more care. A challenge can arise from one hypothetical case where a child is raised confined to a room with no care or attention. Even though the child would not have family bonds, it would still be considered wrong to consume it as meat, for example, since the potential for family still exists as long as the child is removed from the room and given to foster parents. This does not work with a cow, because they do not develop foster families in the wild or even in outdoor farms. Ethics of family is a simplified view of human values in operation in modern society and helps to explain why consuming animals is still being done and will continue, and why factory farms, for instance, are not widely considered improper.

This was an extensive survey of all types of thought developed to explain why animals should have moral standing and what is wrong with theories that state otherwise. The tendency of our world is to go further in the direction of responsibility to animals and the environment. The question is if this interest for protection will be based on human interests of economics and desires, or if it will grow as a branch of equality theories such as bio-centrism and deep ecology.

⁶ Ahimsa (Sanskrit: अहिंसा) is a term meaning to do no harm (literally: the avoidance of violence - himsa). It is an important tenet of the Indian religions (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism).

The basic concept that must be understood is that life is precious and that life also needs non-living environments to be able to flourish and sustain itself. Hopefully human desires will be balanced with the well-being of nature and all will be satisfied, content and safe.

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Further reading:

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